

Perceptions of general practitioners and physiotherapists towards the implementation of a stratified model of care for low back pain

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Introduction: Low back pain (LBP) is the most prevalent rheumatic and musculoskeletal condition in Portugal. The results of a recent study have suggested that the current clinical practice is not in line with clinical guideline recommendations and may not be delivering the best outcomes to LBP Portuguese patients. Since the stratified primary care approach has demonstrated clinical and cost-effectiveness in the UK, the SPLIT project aimed to introduce a similar approach that involves general practitioners (GPs) and physiotherapists (PTs) in the triage and targeted treatment for LBP patients, in Portugal. Considering that the organization of the primary care system differs in these two countries, it is relevant to explore the perceptions of the main stakeholders regarding the SPLIT stratified model of care, as this may contribute to a more effective implementation.

Purpose/Aim: To explore Portuguese GPs' and PTs' perceptions regarding the SPLIT model. In particular, this study aimed to identify and understand the acceptability of this model as well as the potential barriers and facilitators to its implementation.

Materials and Methods: After obtaining ethical approval, two focus groups (one for each professional group) were carried out. The focus groups were based on a semi-structured interview schedule, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was conducted. Firstly, two researchers independently coded the transcripts. Secondly, these researchers discussed the codes and examined their scope and relevance. Thirdly, the researchers developed a coding scheme that included the main themes and sub-themes, as well as the connections among them.

Results: Four themes emerged from data analysis. In the first theme, the participants explored the aspects related to the acceptability of the SPLIT model, such as the satisfactory amount of effort that is expected to be required for its implementation. In the second theme, the potential facilitators to the implementation of the model were identified, such as the participants' personal motivation. In the third theme, the potential barriers were explored, with particular emphasis on the challenges related to the change of routine care. Lastly, the participants explored the importance of introducing specific adjustments in their services, such as the participation of PTs in GPs' meetings, in order to contribute to the successful implementation of the model.

Conclusion: This study has offered the first insights into the perceptions of GPs and PTs regarding the acceptability of the SPLIT model, as well as the potential facilitators and barriers to its implementation. This knowledge may contribute to the successful implementation of stratified care for LBP patients in Portugal, as it provided information on how best implement it according to the specificities and needs of the context.

Keywords: low back pain, stratified care, health services research, qualitative research